

RESILIENCE

Reflections on creativity and healing

Dr. Jacqueline Senator Orcutt



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By J. A. Senator Orcutt

Originally written for Creative Studies - Art and Healing

Taught by Dr. Donohue At Saybrook University

Guidewithin

San Rafael, CA

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Resilience

I began my research of creativity and resilience with the intention of learning more about the process of healing through art and how creativity is approached and handled in terms of illness. I quickly found that the research topic of creativity and healing has a wide-range of specialization within different areas of focus. This paper cannot comment on all the various research papers, theories and dimensions of healing included within the scope of resilient creativity. The focus of this paper will be limited to the interaction between artist, illness and their art as an act of resilience. This paper will review the resilient creativity of two famous artists and possible implications and benefits for cultural learning in relation to their individual creativity.

Approaching Resilience

Resilience is the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties. For an artist it means rebounding into creativity to facilitate a new stage of growth and exploration. Art and art creation offers a valuable opportunity to explore our psyche in order to learn and discover parts of ourselves, as well as providing a space for healing. This healing extends to others; as viewing another's art can promote healing as a vehicle to transform thought and mood. Many artists use their process of creating art as a healing avenue to reclaim their creativity and joy in the midst of illness or to mend a broken soul emotionally. Art facilitates this healing by gathering the artist's awareness to a single pointed focus on to something other than their affliction or limitation. The same amazing creativity that launches their artwork is also revealed in their choices when dealing with their illness in creative ways. It is this use of creativity that can help teach others to develop their own creative solutions when dealing with illness.

Henri Matisse

Henri Matisse was preparing for a legal profession when disease changed his life. He became ill with appendicitis and had to refrain from work. As a diversion he began to paint. Matisse became enthralled with his new discovery. Saying he “discovered colour-not through other painters’ work but from the way light revealed itself in nature” (Sandblom, 1996, p. 31). It seems Matisse found the healing light of the outdoors in nature a welcome respite from the indoor chambers of illness that lasted for nearly a year. This new perspective of seeing ‘radiant light’ may have been facilitated by that stark difference having spent so much time indoors in his sick room perhaps living in shadowy light. Interestingly, this radiant light that dances in many of Matisse paintings seems to be birth from these experiences driven by nature and his creative perception given to him after his illness.

Matisse tells how he experienced his creativity: “I had become possessed by painting and could not abstain. When I started to paint, I felt transported to a kind of paradise ... Something drove me, I do not know what, a force, something alien to my normal life as a man” (Sandblom, 1996, p. 32). This may be seen as an example of an artist’s single pointed awareness to a focus on to something other than their affliction. It appears that the creative urge pushed Matisse to find a new way to live beyond illness as a painter instead of a recluse with health challenges. Matisse admitted that he could not understand the nature of his creativity; it is a mysterious gift perhaps not meant to be solved but enjoyed for the phenomenon that it is. For some Matisse’s illness could be seen as a blessing in disguise as it brought such masterful beauty into the world that quite possibly could have been missed had he not fallen ill. It seems Matisse’s creative urge not only helped him cope with his illness, but gave him a new identity and a new life.

There seems to be a certain element of rebirth within Matisse's life story that repeats again and again. Jung wrote about rebirth specifying five different archetypal forms within the collective unconscious. Matisse appears to fit the *renovatio* or renewal of being.

Rebirth. (*renovatio*). "The fourth form concerns rebirth in the strict sense; that is to say, rebirth within the span of individual life.... This word has a special flavour; its whole atmosphere suggests the idea of *renovatio*, renewal, or even of improvement brought about by magical means. Rebirth may be a renewal without any change of being, inasmuch as the personality which is renewed is not changed in its essential nature, but only its functions, or parts of the personality are subjected to healing, strengthening, or improvement, Thus even bodily ills may be healed through rebirth ceremonies" (Jung, 1990, p. 114).

The magical means of course was illness acting like a catalyst for a new life that could support Matisse's creativity.

"I had become possessed by painting and could not abstain. When I started to paint, I felt transported to a kind of paradise ... Something drove me, I do not know what, a force, something alien to my normal life as a man"

— Matisse

Matisse's painting style changed again after another period of disease due to bronchial problems. Matisse writes "I left l'Estaque because of the wind had brought on a bothersome bronchitis. I went to Nice to cure it-and have remained there for practically the rest of my life," (Sandblom, 1996, p. 32). Matisse travel to the South and his art changed to reflect his sensitive study of the light that the area is known for. During this time in his life he focus exclusively on his art; he abandoned his family and social duties in order to live just for his art. A new impressionism was born in Matisse's art, born out of the personal experience he had with nature and light. Matisse's artistic style is lustrous with magnificent color that seems to relate happiness. Matisse commented himself. "There is a great tension brewing, a tension of specifically pictorial order, a tension that comes from the interplay and interrelationship of elements (Sandblom, 1996, p. 33). It appears that the creative urge once again facilitated Matisse to shift his lifestyle and focus to pursue his art and perhaps inward healing. From his writing it seems he was living a vital and happy existence. I cannot imagine the courage it must of took to turn away from family and social responsibility to follow so dedicated a journey of healing through creativity as Matisse did at this point in his life. Perhaps that is part of being resilient, choosing to do what is required for healing regardless of outward influences.

Later at seventy, Matisse developed colon cancer. He had an operation and his life was saved, but the wound became infected resulting in a large hernia which kept him partially bedridden for the last thirteen years of his life (Sandblom, 1996). This physical limitation did not limit Matisse's creative urge and like before it appears it have driven him to recreate his art and himself again. Matisse's work from this time is simple, elegant and bursting with color that sings of joy, happiness and inviting life. I truly appreciate having his art and stories from this part of his life because I feel they reveal the blessings and growth that is possible even under the most distressing conditions of physical limitation. This might be considered one of the ultimate examples of resilience because Matisse not only evolved creatively beyond his limitation but developed a new creative style in his art and made a vital contribution to modern art.

Matisse during his earlier years had ventured on to new paths in modern art (please see appendix I). I think he tried to be modern and achieve it to a certain degree in the beginning of his art, but the work he did later undoubtedly influenced modern art culture in an iconic way. *Decorative Figure against an Ornamental Background* fills me with joy. At first, I thought it was too busy and it reminded me a little of an oriental vase. This might be because I love the simplicity of the later work. However, after sitting with it for a while I find I delight in the textural aspect of the pattern and color; it's delightful. So, I say again, Matisse's *Decorative Figure against an Ornamental Background* fills me with great joy. I really appreciate his use of color and pattern; it feels playful and fun to me. Although he may have suffered while creating his art the work itself inspires pleasure. Perhaps Matisse's characteristic of resilience could be considered joyous—a pursuit of lightness.

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Matisse explained how his illnesses had changed his attitude towards life and art. He wished to fill his new life (post illness) with as much happiness as possible. This choice is an act of resilience as it takes back control over how one is willing to live under the new conditions presented. Matisse chose to live life filled with ease and happiness instead of living in a state of pain and suffering. He wished to allow himself the joy of treading paths— light of heart and without effort (Sandblom, 1996). This is quite visible in his art done during the later years. His later work demonstrates a happy air of relaxed contentment (please see appendix II). I especially like the *Blue Nude*. I feel it has more of Matisse in this piece, by which I mean more of his imagination and creativity in expression. It seems to allow me to have more imagination because it is so fresh and clean, almost simple, just color. “Matisse himself was so convinced of the beneficial radiation of his colour and its power to heal that he hung his pictures around the beds of ailing friends” (Sandblom, 1996, p. 35). Matisse’s resilience is symbolically shared through his art to help heal others and bolsters their own resilience to heal. I believe this illustrates Matisse’s resilient ability to heal through the use of color to create joy.

“Matisse himself was so convinced of the beneficial radiation of his colour and its power to heal that he hung his pictures around the beds of ailing friends”

— Sandblom, 1996

Matisse's art has in many ways continued to work as art that is healing to the viewing audience. The works are beautiful burst of color that seems to emit a certain kind of joyous happiness. I believe this is why so many reproductions have been made. When exploring the use of archetypes in Matisse's works of art; we find the single nude female form repeated many times and other portraits of women and flowers. I see the goddess archetype in this simplistic feminine form and nature. I feel this may have been relevant to Matisse's healing process as the goddess archetype is also the healing mother, lover, friend and muse. The healing power of art can help to remedy inward wounds as well as outward wounds; it may be possible that Matisse suffered some psychological wound that is being healed through this particular archetypal imagery. Or perhaps the female figure is an outward expression of his anima, the totality of unconscious feminine psychological qualities held within the psyche (Jung, 1990).

Leonardo da Vinci

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) was an Italian painter, sculptor, architect, musician, mathematician, engineer, inventor, anatomist, geologist, cartographer, botanist, and writer (Zausner, 2007). He is probably the most famous artist in history.

Leonardo da Vinci has often been described as the archetype of the Renaissance Man, being described as a man of "unquenchable curiosity" and "feverishly inventive imagination" (Gardner, 1970). It was not only his aptitude and skill to create, but his expansive curiosity that his interests took that demonstrates how creative and innovative he was. Leonardo da Vinci accomplishments are often credited as beginning the High Renaissance in art (Hartt, 1987; cited in Zausner, 2007). According to art historian [Helen Gardner](#), "his mind and personality seem to us superhuman, the man himself mysterious and remote" (Gardner, 1970, p. 450–456). The Renaissance Man archetype fits perfectly for Leonardo da Vinci not only for his varied interests and accomplishments but because his nature was also reported to be highly cultured, compassionate, intelligent, kind and mysterious.

It is thought that Leonardo's brilliance may have come from his unique perspective when viewing the world. "Dyslexia inspired his profound observations of the physical world, and attention deficit disorder turned him inward to the realm of imagination" (Zausner, 2007, p. 95). The characteristics of Leonardo da Vinci resilience is obviously mastery. His conditions which are labeled disorders were treated by him as assets in learning creatively. It also appears that he did not feel limited but perhaps even encouraged by his unique perspective given to him by his so called disabilities.

It is astonishing to learn that Leonardo da Vinci had learning disabilities because throughout my entire education even in college art classes, art history courses and art theory classes this important fact was never mentioned. I learned that he was a genius which of course is also true, but leaves out the fact of how he was a genius. Individuals with learning disabilities often encounter prejudice in society due to a lack of understanding. This misunderstanding of what it means to have a learning disability maybe due to a lack of educational opportunities in the larger community or a lack of understanding the disorder. I cannot help but think that few would have this narrow-mindedness of dyslexia or attention deficit disorder if Leonardo da Vinci was associated with them. This would also be true of other famous dyslexics; Albert Einstein, Woodrow Wilson, Winston Churchill, Thomas Alva Edison, George S. Patton, and William Butler Yeats (Zausner, 2007).

The telltale sign that Leonardo da Vinci was dyslexic is thought to be evident in his mirror writing. When non-dyslexic individuals mirror-writes they will consciously reverse their letters; while dyslexic individuals are not aware that they are either seeing or writing backwards. All of Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks are written in mirror script, so it is assumed that he knew he was writing this way. His dyslexia appears more obvious when Leonardo writes standard script and unconsciously reverses letters and numbers. Leonardo was also able to reversed images. He consciously used image reversals during the composition of his pictures. He used this ability as an aid to his art and had a tendency to prefer reversals of the imagery. While many people with dyslexia reverse letters; writing completely in mirror script is rare (Zausner, 2007). It has been reported that some dyslexics, who do write in reverse prefer it as it is more comfortable for them and seems to allow their thoughts to flow in a more easeful way. This may have been true for Leonardo.

His mirror-written notebooks leave us more than just a legacy of his ideas; it might provide insight into how the brain functions. I find this ability interesting in an evolutionary sense, this particular tendency when more dominant might support heightened creativity due to this type of brain function. More research would be required to see what can be learned. There are other reasons that may have influenced or perhaps benefited Leonardo to mirror write. Mirror writing offered privacy and protection against theft of his ideas or the encroachment from fearful leaders or members of society. Another consideration is that writing from right to left could have been more comfortable for the left-handed artist.

Leonardo used his unique vision to propel his creativity, turning an affliction into an extraordinary ability that gave him a certain freedom others did not have.

Leonardo da Vinci's life appears to represent certain mastery. The archetypal energy of transformative mastery is often represented by the Magi—known as divine impulse expressed in man (Butler, 1975). Leonardo seemed to have a divine impulse as he mastered so many different fields of study and perhaps held this archetypal energy of the Magi. I feel this is fitting as most of Leonardo's artwork and inventions seems to act as potential liaisons between the divine and humanity. I can imagine there may have been forces in the outside world that made a creative mind such as his prone to misunderstanding. Leonardo empowers himself with his creativity and transform not only how he is able to be in the world but also influences the world. We have so many gifts from this man; inventions, insights into the natural world and beautiful art, all brought forth through his creative transformative genius. His mastery continues to inspire the world through the legacy of his life's work.

Perspectives on Resilience

The ability to spring back into shape when coping with a physical or mental illness is worthy of note. Most people struggle to spring back after a long day at work making the idea of further strain understandably difficult. Taking challenges and making them into victories is an important part of resilience. These two great artists have revealed a persistence and dedication that I did not know existed within the realm of resilience. Each man used the opportunity to focus on what they wanted for themselves and created it within the physical limitations they were given. For Matisse it was lightness of being and joy which he found through the use of color and shape inspired by nature. Leonardo da Vinci transformed his affliction into an amazing ability granting him great intellectual freedom to pursue his natural curiosity. It is amazing to consider the beauty and art that these men gave to the world and even more so to consider the gift their life stories provide as examples of resilience. I have found another reason to adore these two men and more importantly I've learned new ways one can be resilient.

Resilience is more than just the ability to bounce back; it is the choice to decide for oneself that which is best or desired and make it happen for the better. It also appears to be a willingness to embrace the limitation and to decide to work with it instead of against it. This choice can only be made when a certain acceptance and healing have transpired. Perhaps that is the takeaway message for us all to be accepting and forgiving of our limitations while looking towards that which is most desired and believing the limit is not limiting.

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Appendix I



Decorative Figure against an Ornamental Background by Henri Matisse

Appendix II



Blue Nude paper cut out (1952) by Henri Matisse

Sourced from <http://www.henri-matisse.net/cutouts/n.html>

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